10-108

Department of Veterans Affairs

AIDS

HIV Testing in the VA

What you need to know

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WHAT IS AIDS?

AIDS is a disease caused by a virus called the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). This virus kills cells in your body that help fight diseases. When these cells are killed, you can get other diseases like rare infections, pneumonias and cancers. These diseases can kill you.

HOW WOULD I GET AIDS?

AIDS is infectious. That means the virus that causes AIDS, the HIV, can be passed to you from other people but only in special ways. The virus lives in the blood, vaginal secretions or semen of infected people. The main ways the virus passes from one person to another are:

- by having sex with someone who has the virus
- by sharing needles and syringes
- from a pregnant mother who has the virus to her baby

There is a small chance the virus can be passed through a blood transfusion. This happens only when a person who has the virus gives blood.

WHAT DOES "HIGH RISK FOR AIDS" MEAN?

Some of the ways you act are called risky because of the way the virus passes from one person to another. High risk means you are acting in one or more ways that help pass the virus between people.

High risk ways of acting are to:

- have sex with people you don't know
- have sex with many different people or with people who have sex with many other people, such as prostitutes
- have anal sex
- have sex with someone who shoots drugs or has anal sex with someone else
- share drug needles and syringes
- have sex without using protection like condoms (rubbers) and spermicidal jelly

HOW CAN I FIND OUT IF I HAVE THE AIDS VIRUS?

The only way you can find out if you have the virus is to be tested. In the VA, your doctor has to order the test for you and will ask you if you would agree to testing. You may also ask for the test.

WHEN SHOULD I THINK ABOUT HAVING THE TEST?

You should think about having the test if you or your sex partner are acting in one or more ways that put you at high risk. Sometimes your doctor will ask you to be tested. If you are sick the test will help to find out why.

DO I HAVE TO HAVE THE TEST?

No. Testing in the VA is voluntary. You must decide if you want to be tested. To help you decide, you must know what testing means. You must talk with a doctor or a counselor before you decide. They will answer any of your questions or tell you who can answer your questions. If you decide to be tested, you must sign a form called a consent form. This consent form says you understand about the testing and what it means. Do not sign the form until you do understand.

WHAT IS AN AIDS TEST?

The AIDS test is really a blood test for the virus that causes AIDS. It is not a test for the disease called AIDS. The test for the virus (HIV) is done by taking a blood sample from your arm. The blood is tested for a special marker that usually is in the blood only when a person has the virus. This marker is called an antibody. The marker may take up to 3 months to appear in the blood once you have the virus. The time between getting the virus until the marker is in the blood is called the "window" period. If the marker is in your blood on the first test, the test will be done again. If the marker is found a second time, a different test will be done. The same tube of blood will be used for all three tests. Three tests are done to be sure you really do have the virus.

IS THE TEST FOOLPROOF?

No. In a very small number of people, the test may show the marker when you do not have the virus. But, the test alone will not be used to tell if you have the virus. Your doctor will use it to help decide if you are infected.

WHAT DO THE TEST RESULTS MEAN?

If the marker is not found in the blood, the test is called negative. People call this "HIV negative" or "HIV-". Sometimes tests are negative when people really do have the virus. This is because a person could have the virus but the blood hasn't had time to build up the marker. It is the "window period" of the test. If you are at high risk, your doctor or counselor may suggest testing again at a later time. If all three blood tests show the marker for the virus, the test will be called positive. People call this "HIV positive" or "HIV+". A positive test means you are infected with the virus that causes AIDS. It does not mean you have AIDS unless you are sick with one of the rare infections, pneumonias, or cancers seen in AIDS. Many people are HIV positive but are not sick. Doctors still aren't sure if all people who are HIV positive will get AIDS. You and your doctor must talk about what the test means in your case.

WHO WILL KNOW IF I TAKE THE TEST?

Your doctor and the people who are taking care of you at the VA will know if you take the test. The test results will be in your medical record. The test for the virus and the results (positive or negative) are given special protection in the VA. This special protection means that the test and results will not be given to anyone outside the VA unless you agree to it in writing, except in special cases. You need to know the

special cases when your test results may be given to someone outside the VA.

The most common special cases are:

- Positive test results may be given to the local or state public health department. The reason for this is to help public health doctors understand what is happening in the spread of the virus. The only way they can understand is to collect information on the people who have the virus.
- If you are positive and do not want to tell your spouse or sex partners, your doctor or counselor can tell them for their protection. If this bothers you, talk with your doctor or counselor before you are tested.

IF MY TEST IS POSITIVE, WHAT SHOULD I DO?

First, talk with your doctor or counselor. Anyone who has the test should have a follow-up appointment with the doctor or counselor to discuss the results of the test. These people are there to help you and to answer any questions you might have. Second, because you can spread the virus to other people, there are some things you should not do:

- **Do not** have sex without using protection, that is a condom (rubber) and spermicidal jelly
- **Do not** give blood, organs or sperm
- **Do not** share drug needles and syringes

IF MY TEST IS POSITIVE, SHOULD I TELL ANYBODY?

You must decide. You should tell your spouse or sexual partners to protect them. They may want to be tested just as you have been tested. You should know that your doctor or counselor will be concerned about protecting the health of your spouse or sex partners.

Your doctor or counselor will ask you if you have told these people. If you will not or cannot tell your spouse or sexual partners, the doctor or counselor can help you. Remember, he or she can tell your spouse or sex partners if you do not tell them yourself. Telling anybody else is up to you. It helps to tell anyone who is taking care of you like your dentist or another doctor. Friends or other people in your neighborhood or at work do not have to keep that information confidential. Telling them could lead to discrimination. Not everyone understands the facts about HIV infection or AIDS. Other than your spouse or sex partners, you know best whom you can tell.

WHAT IF I DON'T WANT TO TAKE THE TEST? CAN I STILL GET HELP IN THE VA?

Yes. You may refuse to take the test and still get care. Just know why you are going to be tested or why you do not want to be tested.

WHY SHOULD I WANT TO KNOW IF I HAVE THE VIRUS?

First, knowing if you have the virus will help your doctor take care of you. There are medicines which help people who are positive and which help people who have AIDS.

Second, if you are positive, you should know how to keep from passing the virus to others.

Third, if you are positive, you should know what to look for so you can get help as early as possible. Your chances for the treatment that is best for you are better.

Fourth, if you are negative, you should still know how to protect yourself.

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